Old Testament Godhead Language

The Old Testament contains elements of (orthodox) Israelite theology and worship that New Testament writers would much later recognize as a Godhead—the view that God comprises more than one personage, each of whom is identified as the presence of Yahweh. Israel derived their understanding of the Godhead from their version of the divine council, or pantheon (i.e., God and His heavenly host), and the binitarian (two persons) language used for Yahweh and other figures that the OT writers identify so closely with Yahweh that they are inseparable, yet distinct.

Israel's Divine Council: An Overview

The closest parallel to Israel's (and therefore the OT's) conception of the assembly of the heavenly host under the authority of Yahweh is the divine council of Ugarit. Practitioners of Ugaritic religion organized the unseen divine world into three (or possibly four) tiers. In the top tier dwelled El and his wife Athirat (Asherah). The second tier was the domain of their royal family ("sons of El"; "princes"). One member of this second tier, Baal, served as the co-regent of El; despite Baal being under El's authority, worshipers gave him the title "most high." The third tier was for "craftsman deities," and (perhaps) the fourth and lowest tier was reserved for the messengers (*mal'akhim*), essentially servants or staff.

The OT exhibits a three-tiered council (the craftsman tier is absent). In Israelite religion, Yahweh, at the top tier, was the supreme authority over the divine council, which included a second tier of lesser *elohim* ("gods"), also called the "sons of God" or "sons of the Most High." The third tier comprised the *mal'akhim* ("angels").

Orthodox Yahwism replaced the co-regent slot that Baal occupied with a sort of binitarian Godhead, in which Yahweh occupied both slots. The OT in fact describes Yahweh with titles and abilities that Canaanite literature attributes to both El and Baal. Israelites thus fused El and Baal in their worship of Yahweh—a literary and theological strategy that asserted Yahweh's superiority over the two main divine authority figures in wider Canaanite religion. Within Israelite religion, Yahweh's occupation of both of the two highest tiers resulted conceptually in two Yahwehs—one invisible, the other visible. At times both speak as characters in the same scene, but more frequently, they are virtually interchangeable.

Israel's Binitarian Godhead

The Angel of Yahweh

The relationship between Yahweh and the Angel of Yahweh ("Angel of the LORD") provides the most familiar example of "two Yahwehs." The OT writers at times deliberately make the Angel of Yahweh indistinguishable from Yahweh (e.g., Exod 3:1–14). For instance, according to Exod 23, the Angel has Yahweh's "Name" in him (Exod 23:20–23). This passage gives a glimpse of the Hebrew Bible's "Name theology," in which reference to "the Name" actually refers to Yahweh Himself. Thus, in Exod 23, Yahweh indicates that He is in the Angel. And yet, in other passages, Yahweh and the Angel can be

simultaneously—but separately—present (Judg 6). Various OT passages attribute God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt to both the God of Israel and the Angel (e.g., Judg 2:1–3; 1 Sam 8:8; Micah 6:4). In light of Deut 4:37, which states the "presence" of Yahweh was responsible for Israel's deliverance from Egypt, these passages provide a constructive case for binitarianism. The divine presence, of course, is Yahweh Himself, His "essence." Perhaps most tellingly in this theology is the text of Gen 48:15–16, which fuses God and the Angel. Jacob, near death and pronouncing blessing on Joseph's sons, speaks of God's saving action in a way that highlights the fusion of Yahweh and the Angel:

> When Israel saw Joseph's sons, he said, "Who are these?" Joseph said to his father, "They are my sons, whom God has given me here." And he said, "Bring them to me, please, that I may bless them." Now the eyes of Israel were dim with age, so that he could not see. So Joseph brought them near him, and he kissed them and embraced them. And Israel said to Joseph, "I never expected to see your face; and behold, God has let me see your offspring also." Then Joseph removed them from his knees, and he bowed himself with his face to the earth. And Joseph took them both, Ephraim in his right hand toward Israel's left hand, and Manasseh in his left hand toward Israel's right hand, and brought them near him. And Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on the head of Ephraim, who was the younger, and his left hand on the head of Manasseh, crossing his hands (for Manasseh was the firstborn). And he blessed Joseph and said,

"The *God* [*ha-elohim*] before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked,

The *God* [*ha-elohim*] who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day,

The *Angel* [*ha-mal'akh*] who has redeemed me from all evil,

May *he* bless the boys" (Gen 48:8–16).

But this is complicated by the biblical teaching that God is eternal (in that He existed before all things) and that angels are created beings. The explicit parallel of "God" and "Angel," thus, does not imply that God is an angel. Rather, it affirms that *this* Angel *is* God. The verb "bless," moreover, *is grammatically singular*; a plural verb would indicate that Jacob is asking two different persons to bless the boys—the singular thus denotes a tight *fusion* of the two divine beings—one eternal and one not.

The Angel that embodies Yahweh's presence parallels the role of Baal not only as co-regent but also as the warrior who fights for El. According to Josh 5:13–15, it is the Angel who leads Israel, "sword drawn in his hand," to the promised land as the captain of Yahweh's host. This precise description appears in only two other places in the OT, both in reference to the Angel of Yahweh (Num 22:23; 1 Chr 21:16). Thus, while orthodox worship of Yahweh precluded cosmic rule by two separate and distinct deities (El and Baal in Ugaritic religion, Yahweh plus another distinct deity in Israelite religion), it could tolerate two personages of Yahweh. That the Angel had the Presence (Name) of Yahweh in Him but was a distinct personage meant He was Yahweh's presence, but not Him in His fullness.

The Rider on the Clouds

Another motif in the OT that indicates that there is an Israelite binitarian Godhead is the "Rider on the Clouds." Although this epithet was a well-known title for Baal, the Hebrew Bible consistently uses it and similar designations to refer exclusively to Yahweh (Pss 68:4; 68:33; 104:3; Deut 33:26; Isa 19:1), with one exception: the "son of man" in Dan 7:13. This human figure—though distinct from the Ancient of Days (the enthroned deity described in Dan 7)—bears a title reserved exclusively for Yahweh in the OT.

References to God in the Third Person by Yahweh

In certain OT passages, Yahweh appears to refer to Yahweh, or "God," in the third person: "Then *the LORD rained* on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire *from the LORD* out of heaven" (Gen 19:24) and '*I overthrew* some of you, *as when God overthrew* Sodom and Gomorrah, and you were as a brand plucked out of the burning; yet you did not return to me*,' declares the LORD*" (Amos 4:11).

The Two Powers in Heaven Doctrine of Judaism

Jewish thinkers in the Second Temple period (circa 516 BC–AD 70)—who were quite familiar with these patterns in the Hebrew text—did not indicate that any of it violated monotheism. Yahweh, quite simply, was alone at the top of the heavenly host, albeit in two forms. In fact, Jewish theologians and writers during this period devoted a great deal of speculation to more precisely identifying the second Yahweh. Their guesses ranged from divinized humans from Israel's history (Adam, Abraham, and Moses were leading candidates) to exalted angels (Gabriel, Michael) to other intermediate figures (e.g., Philo's "the Word"). These guesses were solidified into religious sects, and thus emerged the "two powers in heaven" doctrine of Judaism.

However, the early Christians (who were also Jews), altered the course of these speculations when they identified the second power, or second Yahweh, with Jesus. This identification allowed the first Christian converts—all of them Jews—to simultaneously worship both the God of Israel and Jesus of Nazareth without acknowledging any other god. Affirming Jesus' incarnation as a man went beyond affirming Yahweh embodied in human form—Jesus was crucified as a blasphemer who made Himself equal with God. (The idea that Jesus was the *incarnate* second Yahweh offended Jews who had formerly accepted the "two powers.") It wasn't until the second century AD that Jewish authorities declared the "two powers" teaching to be heresy.

The Holy Spirit as "Third Yahweh" in the Old Testament

Writers in the OT occasionally make statements about Yahweh that actually reference the Holy Spirit—equating the two. For example, in Isa 63:7, the prophet refers to Yahweh as doing good to His people. But according to Isa 63:9, "the angel of his presence" saved Israel. This is a reference to Yahweh's deliverance of Israel from Egypt. Israel is then recorded as responding by "rebelling" (*marah*) against and "grieving" (*atsab*) the Holy Spirit (Isa 63:10). In Psalm 78:40–41, which directly parallels this passage, the same two Hebrew verbs refer directly to God ("they rebelled against him"; "they grieved him"). Consequently, these two passages identify the Holy Spirit with God.

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See Also:

Elohim as “Gods” in the Old Testament

Theophany in the Old Testament

Divine Council LBD